

Old Pioneer Cemetery

By Richard Van Wagoner

Death came home to me when I was six years old. My father took my younger brother Gill and I with him and mother to the 1952 funeral of Uncle George Van Wagoner. Not having met this man in life, I was unprepared to greet him in death. But there we were, standing in the mourning line at the Olpin Mortuary in Heber. As we inched closer I tried not to look at Uncle George, but an irresistible force seemed to beckon me towards the shriveled face, the gnarled hands and the stillness.

Suddenly a gust of wind, stirred by an opened door, danced with the corpse's thin phallid hair. My imagination quickly convinced me he was still alive. Life was never the same for me after that. Nightmares of premature burial haunted me for years. A funeral procession or passing hearse was enough to cause me to avert my eyes in terror. I walked blocks out of my way to avoid the Wing Mortuary.

Despite my early trauma, with maturation I came to accept death, to realize that it is merely the final step of earthlife. Thus a few summers ago I was able to watch with fascination the archaeological excavation of graves near Pioneer Park in Salt Lake City.

Lehi's pioneer cemetery, unmarked today, was first dedicated as a burial ground in February 1851 on the occasion of the death of John Griggs

White, a seventy-five-year-old pioneer who made the arduous trek across the plains the previous year. On the day of White's death, which occurred in the fort at Sulphur Springs, carpenter David Savage constructed a coffin from the deceased man's wagon box. The women of the group lined the casket with the choicest material and dressed the body in the best available burial clothes. The corpse was then loaded in a wagon and transported several miles northward to high ground on a windswept bluff on the west bank of Dry Creek.

White's grave, likely dug with the wooden spades of the day, lay deep in the crusted sand just north of State Road--present day Highway 89- which had been constructed through the area in 1850. The graveyard, like all lands in town at the time, was government owned. But once homestead parcels were given out the cemetery became part of Thomas R. Jones's property. Jones soon deeded the burial ground to the City.

Since Lehi cemetery records prior to 1895 have been lost, no documentation for the pioneer cemetery exists. American Fork's earliest graveyard, however, used from 1852-68, was the site of eighty-five known burials (5.3 per year). Because Lehi and American Fork populations were essentially the same during this period, a ration-comparison suggests Lehi's old burial ground held one hundred to one hundred to one hundred ten graves.

Relatively few deaths occurred in Lehi's earliest years. Tragically,

many of those were children who fell victim to accidents and the host of infantile diseases then prevalent. There were some particularly spectacular adult deaths in the community. George Winn, Joseph Cousins, and John Catlin were killed in an Indian fight south of Pelican Point in February 1856. Their frozen, mutilated bodies were brought back to town by a posse and buried in a common grave on the west end of the pioneer cemetery. Murder victims Jacob Lance (1856) and Sol Langley (1861) were also likely buried there--though details surrounding their vigilante-style killings remain shrouded in mystery.

In 1871, the Utah Southern Railroad planned a line through Lehi's cemetery, and the State Road needed widening. City fathers decided to relocate the cemetery. Alderman Israel Evans and sexton George W. Thurmond supervised the surveying of the cemetery which is still in use today. Apparently some, if not most, of the bodies in the old burial ground were disinterred at that time and reburied in the new site in a mass grave though the number of relocations is unknown. To further complicate this mystery, less than ten graves in the new cemetery have markers listing death dates earlier than 1871.

At the time of the removal of remains from the pioneer cemetery, many families had moved away, some did not want their dead relocated, and other graves (including that of John G. White), could not be found. These remaining graves fell into such neglect that old-timers remembered the cemetery as a "big weed Patch." Although the 1913 History of Lehi noted

there was a “movement on foot to care for them and also to erect suitable monuments.”, nothing was done until 1919, when the city had the site cleaned up and erected a fence around it. On 29 June 1950, during the Lehi Centennial Celebration, the local chapter of the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers placed a stone monument with plaque on the site.

Within five years it became apparent that the cemetery marker would have to be moved. Vehicles entering and leaving Denzil Turner’s Tire Shop which had been built on the site of the old graveyard, repeatedly bumped the monument. City officials were sympathetic with the DUP concerns and eventually assisted them in obtaining a small triangular piece of property one block east. In the fall of 1958 the monument was being moved to the new site by members of the Lehi National Guard when it collapsed into a pile of rock and mortar. Undaunted, the DUP women had the marker rebuild and later obtained the city’s cooperation in establishing “Roadside Park” on the property.

Periodically, old graves in the pioneer cemetery have been uncovered. In 1954, while constructing a cesspool near the monument, Don Turner uncovered the skeleton of an unknown red-haired woman. If the Lehi Free Press account of 8 April 1954 is accurate, five more bodies remained buried in the area. Bud Nielson found one in 1976 while installing the sewer line to his new home. The following year Don Harris, who owned Don’s Kar Kare in the former Don’s Tire Shop, unearthed another female skeleton while putting in a hoist. In each of these cases the human remains were turned

over to the police department-who had them reburied in the new cemetery.

If they allow us to have our choice of seats on the morning of the Resurrection I intend to pull up a chair in front of Rosenhan Automotive, which now occupies most of the site of the pioneer cemetery. I suspect that whenever the assigned trumpeter blows his horn a sizeable number of Lehi's earliest settlers will come forth from their final resting place beneath Lee Rosenhan's shop, Bud Nielson's home next door, and the northbound lanes of Highway 89. It should prove to be a memorable event.